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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues in English instruction, compiled by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this report, the fifth annual trends and issues report by the commissions. The commissions and their directors are as follows: (1) Commission on Language (James Stalker); (2) Commission on Literature (Gladys Veidemanis); (3) Commission on Reading (Connie Weaver); (4) Commission on Composition (Sharon Crowley); (5) Commission on Media (William Costanzo); and (6) Commission on Curriculum (Linda Shadiow). Some of the topics discussed in the report include teacher training programs, computer uses in education, the English only movement, the competency test movement, the cultural literacy movement, basal readers, censorship, the whole language movement, teacher assessment, the infusion of literary texts into composition classes, writing-across-the curriculum, journal writing, interactive distance learning, video technology, the role of media in education, and forces affecting current English curriculums. (ARH)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1988--SIX SUMMARIES. SUMMARIES OF INFORMAL ANNUAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE COMMISSIONS OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH.

Compiled by Charles Suhor

Deputy Executive Director, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent Annual Convention, the six NCTE Commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the conclusions and opinions of these groups do not constitute official positions of NCTE, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the fifth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

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Commission on Language

The Commission on Language (James Stalker, Director) encourages the current interest in revising curricula for teacher training programs, is happy to see the continuing interest in using computers in English classrooms at all levels, and wishes to see a continued effort to bringing the renewed study of oral language to the classroom. The Commission expressed certain reservations about these developments which might all be characterized as avoiding the pendulum swing which we so often witness. Revision of teacher training curricula should reemphasize the need for teachers to be knowledgeable about their field, but should not abandon courses that focus on the particularities of teaching in contrast to doing literary criticism, linguistic analysis or the like. Computers should expand the students' opportunities and tools for exploring language in use, and the implementation of oral language study should be integrated with the study of written language in recognition that spoken and written language are simply different modes of expression, different approaches to the acquisition and use of literacy.

As might be expected, the Commission continues to be interested in how students, teachers, and public perceive the use of language and the relative importance of variant forms of English. The Commission wishes to highlight the fact that research over the past several years has significantly increased our professional knowledge in this area, but we are still concerned that we have not found an effective way to pass this knowledge on to the groups mentioned. Traditional perceptions of language use as "good" or "bad" and the study of language as the study of grammar have abated, but continue and need to be addressed. Such views allow the development and support of philosophical positions such as the English only movement, a movement which the Commission continues to regard as

potentially very dangerous.

Finally the Commission sees a constellation of developments which need to be watched, and where possible, replaced with programs which more clearly recognize and use current research. An underlying theme of some of these developments is the desire for a common educational experience for all students, regardless of their linguistic, cultural or intellectual backgrounds. While recognizing the need for some commonality in the educational experience of our nation's children, we also recognize the need to draw on and encourage the diversity that leads to synthesis and growth. The particular areas of concern discussed by the Commission include the competency test movement which does not recognize either the complexity of language and its use or the complexity of teaching and learning. Assessment in and of itself is not bad; reductive assessment which requires all students and teachers everywhere to know the same things and to use language the same leads to simplified educational experiences for all, not an outcome to be desired. Such reduction is inherent in the "effective schools" research and testing which equates test scores with quality education, and in the process fragments the teaching of learning of language. A similar situation exists where state adoption policies dictate the contents of texts for students and teachers in other states and as a consequence lead to a commonality of educational experience which may well not be appropriate for all students and teachers because it does not recognize the linguistic and cultural differences between a Brooklyn urban dweller and an Arizona farm child. In response to these concerns, the Commission will undertake a study of language arts textbooks to determine what views of language and approaches to language study are incorporated in them, because language arts texts, at both the primary and secondary level, often dictate the direction and content of the students' study and knowledge.

Commission on Literature

Three trends strike the Commission on Literature (Gladys Veidemanis, Director) as particularly encouraging: the increased use of literary works in place of basal readers in elementary classrooms, a national groundswell for the restoration of literature to the curriculum, and greatly improved integration of language arts skills in the study apparatus of literary anthologies. The public attention to "cultural literacy," however, is viewed more as a cause for alarm than rejoicing because of what the Commission views as an unfortunate narrowing of the literary canon and an exclusionary approach to the teaching of literature that threaten to nullify the gains made in the profession over the last two decades to affirm the multi-cultural character of American literature. Perceived as particularly damaging is the trivialization of literature through superficial fact tests, acquisition of knowledge by rote or indoctrination rather than personal reading, and misinformation to the public by self-proclaimed prophets of cultural doom.

A depressed economy, combined with the "cultural literacy" movement, has contributed to an increased decline in the representation of literature by minority writers in literature anthologies as well as a marked decrease in the availability of trade books by minority writers. As one Commission member remarked, textbook makers continue to ignore the populations of the major urban centers, which account for more than 50 percent of the student population of this nation. Minority representation in the teaching profession is also shockingly limited, as is teacher awareness of minority writers and techniques for teaching their works. Badly needed is a resurgence of summer workshops and updated publications to assist teachers in dealing with the literatures of America.

Censorship continues to inhibit what is printed and what is taught. Commission members particularly deplore what they perceive as an increase in self-applied censorship, that is, a fear of teaching particular works for fear of personal repercussions. A regrettable consequence is a literary curriculum that is becoming increasingly more narrow, bland, and exclusionary.

In many communities, budget restrictions are bringing about a limitation of the curriculum to a single anthology, the closing down of libraries, and severe reductions in library budgets and staffs. In many schools literature also continues as the "handmaiden" to the study of language or composition. One company, for example, in its study materials for a children's classic, begins with a lesson on diphthongs, completely overlooking reader response and development of the imagination. Greatly to be deplored are all such woeful attempts to use literature solely for teaching isolated skills or concepts.

Poetry continues to be the genre most widely neglected in the curriculum, K-college. Many teachers fear teaching it, are not readers of poetry themselves, and neglect to find poems that speak to the experience of their students. Overall, preparation in the teaching of literature needs to be sharpened, with teachers incorporating insights from reader response theory into their daily practice and awakening to the reality of a pluralistic culture which no "prescribed list" can accommodate.

Commission on Reading

The Commission on Reading (Connie Weaver, Director) noted with pleasure that the whole language movement has taken on a life of its own, rapidly spreading from teacher to teacher and school to school. However, members expressed concern that the term "whole language" is being invoked to promote materials and practices that are contrary to the basic principles of "whole language"--for example, to promote phonics materials and practices that are incompatible with what whole language teachers know about teaching and learning. Though the goal of promoting whole language teaching is praiseworthy, Commission members also expressed concern that some school districts are mandating a whole language approach, seemingly oblivious to the concept of teacher empowerment that is basic to the whole language philosophy. Thus Commission members' optimism about the spread of the whole language movement was tempered by concern for exploitative misuse of the term and abuse of its fundamental tenets.

In relation to a two-day invitational conference and the forthcoming publication Report Card on Basal Readers, the Commission expressed its continuing concern about basal reader instruction that implicitly defines "reading" as scores on tests and "reading instruction" as going through the motions of a script provided in the teacher's manual. More broadly, the Commission expressed its continuing concern with the model of education that underlies not only basal reading series but also the teacher effectiveness movement. As Janet Emig has said, "That teachers teach and children learn no one will deny. But to believe that children learn because teachers teach and only what teachers explicitly teach is to engage in magical thinking."

This misconception about the relationship between teaching and learning underlies also our current methods of assessment and accountability--and more recently, the narrowly-conceived methods of teacher assessment that are being proposed and adopted. All reflect a reductionistic concept of education, wherein knowledge and understanding are reduced to, or replaced by, readily testable bits and pieces of information. Members of the Commission expressed concern that these counterproductive trends are increasing rather than abating. A particular concern is the NCTE's tacit support of the Carnegie-backed move to restructure teacher certification and stratify the profession through tests.

Other concerns expressed by Commission members included the effect on the parent-child relationship of toys that "talk" to and "teach" the child; the continued, though not unchallenged, movement toward establishing English as an official language; and the blaming of family background for children's difficulties in learning to read. Each of these trends reflects an assault upon the culture of home and community.

Commission on Composition

At its November, 1987, meeting, members of the Commission on Composition (Sharon Crowley, Director) identified the following trends and issues related to the teaching of composition as those which merited mention:

TRENDS

1. Members took a positive view of the increasing infusion of literary texts into composition classes. This move attracts faculty to the teaching of composition; it may help to speed the admission of student texts into the canon of "literature"; it reinforces the natural link between the teaching of reading and the teaching of writing; and it may promote the use of trade books, rather than basal readers, in more elementary composition instruction. Basal readers tend to focus students' attention on the "main ideas" in reading and writing.

2. The "whole language" movement seems to be catching on.

3. The use of computers in composition instruction seems to be growing. The commission feels that computers can be used to help students with low-level writing skills such as correcting spelling and editing, unless such uses turn into drill and practice where the computer is little more than an electronic workbook. Members are skeptical that computers have larger contributions to make, aside from the ease afforded writers by word processing, although the growing interest in networking met with the commission's approval.

4. The NCTE Achievement awards have been well received, and such efforts are lauded by the commission.

5. The writing-across-the-curriculum movement seems to be growing stronger. This is a positive development which has revitalized reading and writing instruction in the content areas.

6. The commission feels that recent interest in "critical thinking" is a fix-it which has a lot of glitz but no substance. Many such courses tend to be reductionist, and are taught without a basic understanding of language and language acquisition.

7. Writing centers are being developed in high schools. The commission commends this development, when it is supported by an informed philosophy of composition. Often, however, such centers are only as good as the people who staff them.

8. The commission noted a trend toward the overuse of student journals in writing instruction. While journals are a sound pedagogical took, they should not be used as an exclusive medium of instruction.

ISSUES

1. The paucity of multi-cultural attention that is positive. Members believe that we need more multi-cultural emphasis in K-8. This instruction should recognize differences in ways of learning, writing, and reading. Most research is now based on a uniform

population, the results of which imply something like "all kids need . . . ." English teachers need to take a multiple-literacy view, to know that there is a discourse of the vernacular and a discourse of the classroom.

2. The place of the composition teacher in the English department. Composition teachers at all levels are overworked. In college freshman composition, the majority of such courses are taught by graduate students, part-timers, and full-time "non-continuing contract teachers." The commission deplores this situation and supports the Wyoming Resolution.

3. The commission is very concerned that testing seems to be overwhelming the public school curriculum. Testing disempowers teachers, creating a formulaic curriculum. Teachers themselves are not informed about assessment, testing instruction, or testing philosophy; they need to become involved in the politics of imposing testing. Standardized tests are often cultural gatekeepers; they are social instruments. Often they have a grammar component, upon which assessment of writing skills is based.

Commission on Media

The Media Commission (William Costanzo, Director) noted several recent technological developments which raise fresh possibilities and challenges for the teaching of English. One area of growth is the technology of distance learning. Instructional television has served the educational community for many years, but two-way communication by satellite and cable systems has begun to make distance learning truly interactive. So has electronic mail, which permits students and teachers to send written messages to each other using computers linked through telephone lines. According to preliminary reports, electronic mail focuses attention on writing as communication, heightening audience awareness and encouraging collaborative methods of composing. Another growth area is video technology. Lightweight camcorders have made it easier to create visual compositions, giving new meaning to the term camera-stylo. VCRs and laser disks are replacing film projectors as instruments of film analysis, enabling students to give film, television, and other visual texts the close critical attention traditionally reserved for printed works. Yet, while these advances can make film production and critical viewing easier and more effective, many schools have not acquired the new technologies or used them to the best advantage.

Despite impressive innovations in technology, Commission members cautioned that machines do not automatically solve educational problems. Members expressed particular concern about the status of computers. Although schools across the nation have invested heavily in computers, there seems to be no clear consensus about how these computers should be used. Computer literacy is still a nebulous term, defined differently in different settings.

The group expressed concern that access to computers is being restricted to certain student populations. In some cases, this means that the gap between privileged and disadvantaged groups is widened even further. Members also questioned the limited notion of using computers as mere tools, noting that this leaves out important questions about content, values, and meaning. They pointed out that computers are not entirely neutral in the way they organize knowledge, sanction certain skills, and fashion attitudes toward education. The group emphasized that students ought to be able to decode not only the message, but also the media which mold the messages. Students need to understand that computers, like television, radio, and cinema, are not transparent transmitters of information and entertainment, but by their nature influence whatever they transmit.

The Commission observed that there is still widespread misunderstanding about the role of media in education. This is reflected in the profession's publications, policies, evaluation procedures, and teacher education programs. The group criticized the practice of relegating the study of media to lower level classes and deplored the low status commonly assigned to those who use media in many schools. The group continued to stress the need to incorporate visual thinking and media into language arts instruction at all levels. Today, language is acquired and shaped in an environment in which words are closely tied to images. Well-developed visual skills have never been more essential for effective thinking, reading, and composing. Nor has the need for informed, critical viewers ever been more urgent. The profession must press forward to develop the visual and verbal resources, knowledge, and skills required by our students for clear judgment, creative thinking, and effective communication in the years ahead.

Commission on Curriculum

INTRODUCTION: In past years, the Commission on Curriculum (Linda Shadiow, Director) has summarized trends and issues by identifying and describing key "movement" in the field (legislative mandates, reader response, process approach) wherever that might be. In doing so, the commission duplicated the work of other commissions with narrower charges (e.g. literature, composition) and failed to bring the focus more directly on curriculum. In an effort to clarify the trends and issues as they affect curriculum, members started with a thorough discussion of (1) the "state of the 'things'" and (2) the meaning of curriculum. Members then attempted to merge the two discussions so the resulting report would specifically address curriculum.

In spite of this shift in focus, members noted that much of the discussion seemed to be a continuation of similar sessions from previous years. While realizing that professional trends and issues certainly have a "life" longer than the space from one convention to the next, members expressed frustration that there seemed to be too little professional movement to counter negative trends/issues and too little influence exerted by the positive trends/issues.

FRAMEWORK: The commission developed a framework for this year's trends/issues of four aspects of curriculum. "Curriculum," as we discussed it, included (1) the selection of its components; (2) the ordering or sequencing of these components; (3) the delivery of these components; and (4) the evaluation of these components.

SELECTION of curriculum components	ORDERING of these components	DELIVERY of these components	EVALUATION of these components
Influenced by people like Bloom & Hirsch with indications of more homogeneity at a time when diversity is increasingly necessary	Increasingly regimented and restrictive	Hampered by both external & internal censorship	Not responsive to changes in school populations
	Some positive focus on learners		Seem to wait for outside entities to do this
	Test-driven & text-driven		
Test-driven & text-driven	Influenced by the involvement of people outside of the profession		Not tied to the sound reasons for selection, ordering and delivery
Not responsive to changes in demographics			
	Influenced by "college expectations"		Increasingly, evaluation is <u>driving</u> selection, ordering, and delivery
Influenced by political and often contradictory forces			
Based on competition not cooperation			Often touted for <u>visible</u> rather than

Some move to make
the how something is
to be taught the what
of the teaching

General lack of under-
standing both inside and
outside the profession
of what exactly is
"driving" the curriculum

substantive reasons--
PR over students

Focus on competition--
the athletic model